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Creating a Place for Monstrosity: The Forced Liminality and Limited Mobility of Codified Monstrosity in Leigh Bardugo's King of Scars

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CREATING A PLACE FOR MONSTROSITY: THE FORCED LIMINALITY AND LIMITED MOBILITY OF CODIFIED ANXIETY IN LEIGH BARDUGO'S *KING OF SCARS*

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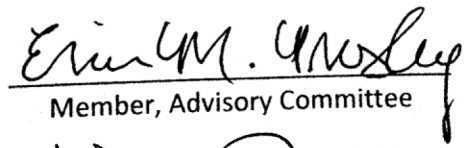

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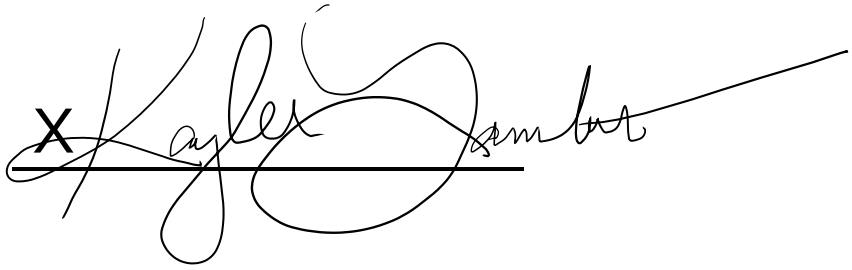
X 

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ABSTRACT

The Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) outlines the purpose of young adult (YA) literature as addressing the unique needs of adolescents, which are "distinguished by unique needs that are – at minimum — physical, intellectual, emotional, and societal in nature" (Cart "Value" para. 8). This unique period in life is liminal, a time between childhood and adulthood. Adolescents search for meaning in the world around them, with literature as one avenue for self-discovery and affirmation. Mental health is one area teenagers seek answers, and YA literature has attempted to provide spaces to navigate those questions in popular contemporary works like Neal Shuterman's *Challenger Deep* (2015) and John Green's *Turtles All the Way Down* (2017); however, these mental health narratives largely apply to genres like romance and drama. These narratives also take place in speculative fiction, although veiled in fantasy elements like supernatural powers and fictional worlds. Leigh Bardugo's *King of Scars* (2019) is one narrative where this underlying mental health narrative underpins the overarching plot of a character, Nikolai Lantsov, attempting to overcome his transformation into a monster. Applying a combination of psychoanalytic theory and place theory first uncovers the metaphor of monstrosity and what it codifies, and then provides the framework for criticizing how the construction of place limits a character's mobility. This thesis argues that Nikolai's half-human/half-monster identity roots him in a liminal space, which is reinforced and propagated by the people around him. Nikolai presents an complex case for study because his internal anxiety is made physical by the

introduction of literal monstrosity, which is a unique feature of young adult speculative fiction.

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I. Introduction

On August 15, 2019, in the wake of the mass shootings that took place in El Paso, Texas, and Dayton, Ohio, earlier that week, President Donald Trump called for increased gun control, paying particular attention to those suffering from mental illness (Cunningham para. 2). This announcement followed days of mainstream media speculating on the cause of the increased mass shootings in the United States, and whether the most recent gunmen were also mentally ill. President Trump followed by suggesting the United States fund research into mental illness, except he likened this research to the many mental institutions (known for harsh treatment of patients) around in the mid-twentieth century that are now closed (Sonmez para. 3). This statement was not received well among many Americans, especially because it illustrates what little progress appears to have been made between combating mental illness stigma in mainstream media and the general American population since these psychiatric institutions were more popular.

The problem is not only in the statement itself, but that the statement propagates a long-standing negative stigma against individuals who suffer from mental illness. Rhetorically, it primes the audience to associate mass shootings with mental illness. It creates a false belief that mentally ill people must be at fault, and mental institutions will solve the problem of mass shootings in our country. The mentally ill become the other, the deviant from social norms, the ones who need to be corrected and put back on the normal path and rejoin society. The presence of this rhetoric

maintains a socially created space built by an arbitrary qualifier of “mentally ill” and “not mentally ill.”

Unfortunately, the issue of falsely relating mental illness with a higher likelihood of committing violence, especially mass shootings, is still common in mainstream media. The American Psychological Association has produced several statements in an attempt to refute these pervasive negative stereotypes. Repeatedly, studies have been conducted measuring the likelihood of individuals diagnosed with a mental illness to commit a violent act, to which no relations have largely been found (ABCT’s Board of Directors para. 3, 5-6; APA para. 5).

Despite the pushback against rhetoric that others Americans suffering from mental illness, the negative mindset towards mental illness prevails in the general population. A 2006 survey found that “60% of Americans thought that people with schizophrenia were likely to act violently toward someone else, while 32% thought that people with major depression were likely to do so” (Harvard Health Publishing para. 1). Not only do these created spaces exist, but Americans are pushed into them by negative social perception, regardless of whether they truly belong in them or not. People are limited by social opinion and socially constructed boundaries largely built on the spread of misinformation.

Marginalized groups facing discrimination and assignment into socially created spaces is not new or revolutionary. Plenty of groups face discrimination built on the principle of “me” as compared to “not me;” individuals with some form of mental illness are just another one of the facets of this growing problem. Mental illness is

abnormal by definition of psychology; it is caused by genetic and environmental factors like inherited traits, exposure to environmental stressors before birth, and brain chemistry, according to Mayo Clinic staff (para. 16). But the categorization of mental illness as abnormal is an inherently othering process which primes individuals early in life to engage in a self-identifying process of "me" as compared to "them." It is a construction of place that Americans see happening daily in news articles and interactions with their peers. This construction of place is not physical. It is not identifiable by a wooden fence enclosing a suburban backyard or a political map. Instead, this construction of place is social; it is the oversimplifying of a national violence problem by separating the "mentally ill" from the "not mentally ill."

This socially created space of "normal" compared to "abnormal" is not only dangerous because it reinforces a false belief of the relationship between mental illness and violence, but because it deters individuals from seeking help which would lead them to proper coping skills. Anxiety and depression are not inherently negative, but when left unchecked, these factors can lead to destructive behaviors.

This mental illness stigma further intersects with other marginalized groups. In a study conducted by Melissa DuPont-Reyes et al., they found that adolescents of color are more likely to distance themselves from those suffering from mental illness because of perceived negative associations. Teens participating in this study responded to a scenario involving a student suffering from bipolar disorder and another with social anxiety. Participants often did not believe that the theoretical students (fabricated for the study) could not overcome what he or she was dealing

with, likely because these participants had not been as exposed to information combating mental illness stigma as compared to their white classmates. DuPont-Reyes and co-authors also concluded that teens experiencing these feelings will likely carry those ideals into adulthood (DuPont-Reyes, et al. para. 10).

DuPont-Reyes's study also pairs with Veronica Feeg's study conducted earlier in 2014, which concluded that even fictional characters exhibiting characteristics of mental illness have impacts on readers. She found that students who were previously exposed to mental illness, like having a family member who struggles with a mental health disorder, were less likely to have a negative stigma toward a fictional character in a narrative (700). Further, Feeg's study featured college students while DuPont-Reyes surveyed adolescents. Both studies point to the importance of exposure to mental health disorders early in life, and that this exposure is impactful on young people and shapes their perception of people with mental health disorders moving forward.

Rather than allow the negative American media to be that sole representation and propagate negative attitudes toward people with mental health disorders, literature has the potential to be a valuable contribution to the popular discourse of mental illness by exposing young readers to characters dealing with these issues in positive manners. An increased presence of characters exhibiting characteristics of mental health disorders in fictional literature, especially catered to a young audience, could prepare young readers for encountering people exhibiting similar characteristics in real life. The most potential for this exposure is in young adult fiction.

Young adult literature is known for being rapidly evolving as the population group changes. Michael Cart, on behalf of the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), argues this in a white paper issued by the YALSA Board of Directors in January 2008. He goes on to provide a brief history of YA literature, arguing "between 1990 and 2000 the number of persons between 12 and 19 soared to 32 million, a growth rate of seventeen percent" ("The Value" para. 3) which created new demand. While these numbers are from the intended YA audience of individuals between 12 and 19 years old, Cart further acknowledges that audiences extend beyond this range to slightly younger and older audiences ("The Value" para. 3), reinforcing the wide range of people YA literature has the potential to reach.

Despite the genre first gaining attention with the publication of S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1976) and Robert Lipsyte's *The Contender* (1976) ("Teenage Culture" Cart), Cart argues that YA literature as a genre that encourages "artistic innovation, experimentation, and risk-taking," has come about since the mid-1990's ("The Value" para. 6), further pointing to how recent the genre has been developing. Although YA literature experienced a boom in the 1970's, it did not maintain its popularity and declined after that initial wave (Fabry para. 6-7). The next wave of YA literature came in the 1990s and extended into the early 2000's with the publication of novels like J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997) and, over a decade later, Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* (2008) (Fabry para. 9). Noticeable from their predecessors, *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games* are both works of speculative fiction where YA fiction before mostly focused on complex but still very real-world

issues rooted in reality. *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games* take this a step further by removing the readers from the world they know, either into worlds where magic exists parallel to the ordinary world (*Harry Potter*), or a post-apocalyptic United States (*The Hunger Games*).

As the audience of YA literature grows and changes, so does the literature reflect those changes. Cart asserts that:

> YALSA also acknowledges that whether one defines young adult literature narrowly or broadly, much of its value cannot be quantified but is to be found in how it addresses the needs of its readers . . . young adults are beings in evolution, in search of self and identity; beings who are constantly growing and changing, morphing from the condition of childhood to that of adulthood. That period of passage called "young adulthood" is a unique part of life, distinguished by unique needs that are—at minimum—physical, intellectual, emotion, and societal in nature ("The Value" para. 9).

This statement should be a crucial underpinning for any scholarship assessing YA literature. It should always call back to the needs of the reader who is at a pivotal threshold in their lives. YA literature is a volatile genre serving an impressionable audience. Young people take in the world from countless inputs, and the messages those inputs convey needs to be constantly assessed as new waves emerge.

Young adults, aged 12 to 15, stand at a threshold. They are consuming media and forming opinions about the world around them, making decisions about how they will move forward into the future and live their lives. Young adults living in the United States today are growing up in a time where "one in six teenagers experience a mental health disorder each year" (National Alliance on Mental Illness "Mental Health"), yet oversimplification of violence in media and the tendency to blame increased violence on the lack of mental health infrastructure is so pervasive that the APA regularly has to issue public statements pushing back against mainstream media.

For years, YA literature has been a force in mental illness narratives, which is important for both normalizing the presence of mental illness and exposing teenagers to situations they are likely to encounter sometime in the future. It takes just a few seconds to query the internet for possible YA books dealing with the topic of mental illness. Novels like Neal Shustermann's *Challenger Deep* (2015), John Green's *Turtles All the Way Down* (2017), Jennifer Niven's *All the Bright Places* (2015), and Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2007) are known for either winning awards or receiving film/series adaptations, with Niven's *All the Bright Places* currently in the process of being adapted to Netflix. Notably, the majority of these works were published in the past ten years. The presence of mental illness narratives is largely limited to the current wave of YA literature.

Young adults are an impressionable audience, and YALSA acknowledges adolescents' vulnerability to self-othering:

> Young adults have an all-consuming need to belong. But on the other hand, they are also inherently solipsistic, regarding themselves as beings unique, which—for them—is not cause for celebration but, rather, for despair. For to be unique is to be unlike one's peers, to be "other," in fact. And to be "other" is to not belong but, instead, to be outcast. Thus, to see oneself in the pages of a young adult book is to receive the reassurance that one is not alone after all ("The Value" Cart para. 13).

Understanding the nature of teenagers searching for validation and how impressionable they are as consumers of media should reinforce the need for scholarship in YA literature that adapts just as quickly as the genre. It also demands the need to constantly reassess what themes are emerging in waves of YA literature, and who the Other in YA fiction is.

YA fiction, like anything else, goes through phases. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series inspired other writers of fantasy, and Collins's *The Hunger Games* series popularized dystopian worlds. Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* (2005) spurred a wave of fiction about vampires, werewolves, and other magical creatures in an urban fantasy environment, followed shortly by Cassandra Clare's *Mortal Instruments* (2007) series. All of these writers continue to be forces in the genre and these trends of speculative fiction show no signs of slowing down. What all of these works have in common (and much of YA in general) is that the main characters in these stories discover something about them that differentiates them from the rest of the population at the outset of

their respective novels, echoing Michael Cart's observations about young adults and Othering. Usually, because of the nature of speculative fiction, this "something" the protagonists discover, is a hidden power or magic that they must channel into productive means.

However, despite the increased popularity of speculative fiction, mental illness narratives have almost entirely remained in contemporary romance and drama YA fiction. There are no shortage of lists online through groups like Amazon, Goodreads, and Epic Reads, who compile lists of best-selling books that feature mental illness narratives. But up until the last couple years, these lists were entirely YA novels taking place in real-world settings. Heidi Heilig's *For a Muse of Fire* (2018) is perhaps one of the first books to make several lists for featuring a character with bipolar disorder in a Southeast Asian fantasy setting as she is trying to find a cure for her "madness."

This is not to say that mental illness narratives are not present in YA speculative fiction, but that they are perhaps more veiled in the magic typical of these fantastical universes. Perhaps the lack of attention to explicit mental health narratives is to avoid the weight that genre typically carries to permeate fantasy meant to escape reality. Even so, characters who exhibit characteristics of mental illness still appear in recent works of speculative fiction. Victoria Schwab's *This Savage Song* (2016), Victoria Aveyard's *Red Queen* (2015), Emily Duncan's *Wicked Saints* (2019), and Leigh Bardugo's *King of Scars* (2019) are just a few popular novels, all published in the past five years, that all demonstrate characters who exhibit behaviors that parallel real-

world anxiety and depression, only their anxiety and depression is explicitly linked to monstrosity and darkness.

While all of these subgenres of YA literature—fantasy, science-fiction, post-apocalyptic, supernatural—continue to be recognizable trends in the literature, I propose a new theme in YA literature is emerging; one that is exclusive to YA speculative fiction (relating to the aforementioned genres). This emerging trope often employs supernatural powers as a baseline for highly visible divisions of power and social hierarchies. This emerging trope relies on a commonality of aestheticized darkness, and these characters who are associated with the darkness are monsters – sometimes physically and sometimes by the protagonist's proscription. These characters are often linked to behavior that would indicate a mental health disorder if their respective narratives took place in the real world. For this reason, it is important to investigate what qualities these characters possess that are limited to the speculative world, and what those qualities might be codifying in the real world. To equate monstrosity and mental health disorders by rite of codifying it through literal monsters is a severe label that restricts characters within the spaces of their narratives, binds them to a permanent in-between state, and reinforces young readers' "fear of being Other," which is contrary to the purpose and responsibility of young adult literature.

II. Review of Literature

Monstrosity is an inherently othering term, with a historically negative connotation. Monsters are nothing new, but what monstrosity represents changes as society changes, so it is necessary to constantly reevaluate. The word monster has always had a historically negative association (Asma 15). "Monster" is rooted in the 14th century, built from meanings like "abnormal shape," "repulsive character," and "abomination" (Online Etymology Dictionary). In the 21st century, this word still carries the same weight, yet the word is frequently used to make comparisons across a wide range of individuals and characters. YALSA acknowledges the inherent othering teenagers take upon themselves, and the validation they seek out in literature. However, what becomes problematic and potentially dangerous is if the literature reinforces the young reader as an other. This is further complicated by writing a common narrative where these othered characters are unsuccessful in their stories, doomed to fail because they cannot overcome their othered nature –especially when linked to mental illness, which is common in teenagers and not inherently negative.

"Monstrous" is a severe label, but the word has been popularized, making its way into daily conversation that blurs the true connotation of the word. Murderers and those who commit heinous crimes are monsters. The villain of an old fairy tale is a monster. But according to the literature, monsters are adolescents struggling with inner turmoil and anxieties; people with physical disabilities are monsters. Stephen Asma in *On Monsters* writes that "everyone is just a little bit monster," referring to any

sense of deviation from society (48). Everyone has struggles and their own inner darkness, but this is currently emerging as the other in YASF.

Several scholars agree that fantasy is a medium that children and teenagers can utilize for understanding their emotions. Joni Richards Bodart, an associate professor and scholar in children's literature, argues that "Reading about supernatural monsters can help teens prepare to face these real monsters in the real world . . . books let us get close to the monster and still be in control" (xxvi). Echoing DuPont-Reyes and Feeg, Bodart points to the effective space of fiction to provide young readers with experiences and characters who may parallel situations they are likely to experience in the real world. Even if these experiences are taking place in fantasy worlds, they still reflect real-world human emotions and fears.

Bruno Bettleheim, a child psychologist, also suggests that exploring darkness through fantasy can be beneficial for children to grapple with these ideas in a controlled setting rather than living them out in the physical world. Bettleheim argues: "children know that they are not always good; and often, even when they are, they would prefer not to be. This contradicts what they are told by their parents, and therefore makes the child a monster in his own eyes" (379). Here, Bettleheim is positioning the "bad" as the monster, where the child associates themselves with monstrosity when they have done something wrong. Bodart is positioning the reader *against* monstrosity, as something the child must face. However, the reader can be both. If the reader/child identifies with the monster, they are subscribing to the behavior society has deemed as "bad" and "the monsters in the real world." By

identifying with the monster, the reader/child has done something wrong and must be defeated.

When examining speculative fiction, we must first unravel what the monsters in the fiction represent, or codify in the real world. In the current wave of YASF, the common concept of darkness and monstrosity is often accompanied by the character associated with such darkness as experiencing behaviors indicative of a mental health disorder –particularly anxiety and depression. Understanding what constitutes monstrosity/otherness before examining how those monsters negotiate space or are limited by the constructions of it, is necessary for criticizing a speculative work featuring a monstrous character. Psychoanalytic theory serves as a critical lens for first unpacking what monstrosity is codifying.

Equating monstrosity with anxiety and depression potentially arises from a combination of Sigmund Freud's writing on psychoanalytic theory and Carl Jung's Model of the Psyche. Often anxieties are tied to the unconscious realm, to which the uniqueness of YASF can be used to represent those unconscious thoughts and manifest them into the physical world by the introduction of physical conceptualizations of darkness and monstrosity. Freud argues that, when readers subject themselves to a story, they must agree to the bounds of the world the author has set forth. He further claims in "The Uncanny," that "[readers] must bow to [the writer's] decision and treat his setting as though it were real for as long as we put ourselves into his hands" (7). Speculative fiction should not be seen as lesser because it is fantastical. It should all be taken as reality within the bounds of its world. Speculative fiction simply presents

more opportunities for the invisible to become visible. Furthermore, if we as readers are accepting the world as truth for as long as we are engaged with the fictional text, this comparison of anxiety and depression to monstrosity becomes more severe. In that particular world, monstrosity may not only be *representative* of anxiety and depression, but anxiety and depression might literally be a monster that the characters are pitted against.

Psychoanalytic theory analyzes repression that transforms into what Freud calls "morbid anxieties" and in which the repression is also something that recurs (13). Freud adds that some fantastical elements, like animism, magic and witchcraft, and involuntary repetition "turn something fearful into an uncanny thing" (14). Freud does not equate the uncanny in fiction with the uncanny in reality. However, because the audience has accepted that the story they are reading is reality for as long as they are engaged in that story, the uncanny still retains its power. Freud argues that, because of subjection to the fantasy world, more uncanny encounters may happen in fiction due to the power of imagination and worldbuilding. The author "guides" readers as the author wants (18-19).

It is not enough to simply reveal the monster in YASF as a codifier of anxiety and depression. Adolescence is a unique time in life of transition. During this time, young people inhabit a liminal space between childhood and adulthood and must overcome the transitory period to be successful. YALSA acknowledges this a part of their organization's beliefs, and this belief drives the purpose of this thesis. It becomes

imperative to study whether this codification of monstrosity as anxiety/depression is a limiter –if the inability to vanquish the monster results in confinement to the liminal.

Maria Nikolajeva, a scholar and professor of children's literature, describes this movement between childhood and adolescents as a type of ritual that, if they do not move completely past the threshold, do not complete the cycle of uniting the whole Self (the postliminal reintegration into society). She calls this an "unaccomplished initiation" (8), which leaves the "unaccomplished" person positioned wholly in the liminal, stuck at the threshold of potential. This extends into an individual's sense of place. If a theme in YASF is emerging that equates monstrosity to anxiety and depression which then acts as a limiter on transitioning out of the liminal, without conquering anxiety and depression, individual's struggle to find a firm sense of place and confirmation that YALSA claims YA literature should value.

Any society has place, even a fictional society (Cresswell 150). This sense of place is not exclusively physical, such as the United States. Place is also tied to emotions (156). Sense of place can be rooted in culture and tradition, as seen in both real-world cultures and fictional cultures that makes novel world-building so rich.

Sense of place can also be extended into markers that claim a landscape, such as what Yi-Fu Tuan, a professor and geographer, discusses in *Space and Place* (1977). The land is untouched until human civilization comes in and marks it, making their culture visible. This visibility also extends to cultural rites and traditions (172). Tuan argues that "Places can be made visible by a number of means . . . human places become vividly real through dramatization. Identity of place is achieved by dramatic

sizing the aspirations needs and functional rhythms of personal and group life" (178). The visibility of place can be across the landscape, or even as an individual expresses their sense of place through dress or participation in that culture. In speculative literature, both of these concepts are important. With the introduction of fantasy elements, like supernatural powers, it then becomes necessary to identify the elements that are representative of culture, or mirror what takes place in the real world. These examples will be fantastical and metaphorical but are equally valuable.

The spaces we inhabit are far from isolated. In "Heterotopias," Michel Foucault explores the ways in which people construct space as an interaction of other spaces. No space is without influence, and sometimes these places are formed as a contrast to another. Spaces may be dynamic or still, high or low, light or dark. They are all linked to one another (3; Cresswell 161). Foucault has several ways by which he categorizes heterotopias, one of which involves living "in a state of crisis," which encompasses adolescents. There are certain spaces only the people belonging to this group can inhabit (4). This space does require any tie to a physical location (5). It simply exists and is felt by those who live and identify with this space. Foucault takes this further by suggesting these spaces of crisis are shifting toward spaces of deviation where individuals in this space are also going against societal norms (5). Deviance further creates the "in" as compared to the "out" of a particular space. Anything outside of the constructed space is deviant, pushing people into this created space based on a collective social construction (Cresswell 150).

Tim Cresswell, a notable geographer, concludes that "one of the fundamental ways to differentiate is by place," (153); We do this everyday. We are "here" and "not there." Just as the pervasive media narrative posits people as either mentally ill or not mentally ill as a social identification, so do we as humans distinguish physical space the same way. Echoing individuals' tendency to differentiate by place, Danielle van der Burgt conducted a study involving how children perceive others who are not from their own neighborhood, essentially seeing the behavior of children toward outsiders and how they placed themselves against others. She found that children identified themselves and quiet and also their own neighborhoods as quiet, whereas they defined places where disruptions came from as loud (267). Van der Burgt builds on previous scholarship by David Sibley by constructing the idea of children keeping the Self pure and quiet and attributing the Other to bad (258), which then was described to be "loud" in the study. Children understand the construction of themselves against the world, and that is something they carry with them into adulthood.

It is important to look at multiple geographic theoretical frameworks for the concept of place. Doreen Massey, a feminist and Marxist geographer, analyzes place from an economic perspective: "Since the late 1980s the world has seen the recrudescence of exclusivist claims to places –nationalist, regionalist and localist. All of them have been attempts to fix the meaning of particular spaces, to enclose them, endow them with fixed identities and to claim them for one's own" (4). Place constructs the Same and the Other, but is also tied to economic power and centrality. The more influential group constructs the space and the norm, which continues to play

out today and varies by culture. In applying this to literature, both of these geographic lenses are necessary for unpacking even in fictional societies who holds the locus of power.

Massey further argues that the creation of space fails to acknowledge that humans and culture are always changing. Society is not static. Spaces are created based on Same and Other, but spaces are not reconsidered as either of these two subjects evolve. These socially created spaces construct the social norm, and anything outside of them is Other (6; 169). The construction of a "home" assumes that home will be static and unchanging (Massey 172). Place should not be static. Part of place is the generation and regeneration of ideas, ever-evolving culture and dynamic society (Cresswell 150). Place can also be constructed across time as a point of reference. The current place and space is compared against itself to the past (Cresswell; Powell). Cresswell argues, "It is possible to be inside a place or outside a place. Outsiders are not to be trusted; insiders know the rules and obey them" (154), just as the children in Van der Burgt's study demonstrated in the children categorize themselves as quiet alongside their quiet neighborhoods and the outsiders as disruption to that quiet.

When discussing both the invisible sense of place and the visible place, it is pertinent to address lack of place and the act of transitioning between place. As Cart mentions earlier, YA literature understands that its readers are going through a crucial transition point in their lives. They are at the threshold of childhood and adulthood. They have reached a liminal stage and are searching for a sense of place in the postliminal adulthood.

Arnold van Gennep, a 19th century ethnographer, coined the term liminality in 1909 after studying the ceremonial rites of passage across different cultures and acknowledged the common thread between them. These rites of passage occur at times of transition, when something must be left behind from the previous stage to achieve the subsequent stage. Van Gennep broadly classifies these as rites of separation (preliminal), transition rites (liminal), and rites of incorporation (postliminal) (11). Van Gennep argues that not all of these stages are equal, though they are still definitive. He specifically provides the example of childhood, adolescence, betrothal, and marriage to reflect the separation from the past (the movement from childhood to adolescence) and reintegration into society provided by marriage to secure a future (27).

This structure of liminality takes place at a theoretical level, but is reflective through real-world, tangible practices. Cartographers use thematic maps to describe physical locations that have some commonality between them. For example, thematic maps are a popular way to describe the results of a Presidential election in the United States. Often, red highlights the Republican states, while blue indicates the Democratic states. At a glance, this is an effective way to get a picture of the spatial distribution of data, but, at the same time, it is easy to lose voices in these types of maps. A map of votes aggregated to the state level will simplify and interpolate data, losing the individual voting distribution of all 120 counties making up Kentucky.

The counties that were aggregated to a value that might not truly be representative of reality fall into a liminal space. The subtle differences in voting across

spatial distribution cannot ever fully be represented in a mere reproduction of reality. Sometimes these boundaries are artificially altered to suit a goal. For example, there are at least four common ways to rearrange the statistics of thematic map data to produce four visually different outputs for the same set of numbers. With human interaction comes bias and restructuring of (someone goes into detail about this somewhere) factors based on how the cartographer views the world.

In this same way, humans make assumptions, stereotyping the world they encounter to create an understanding of it. These assumptions are subject to social constructions. The subjects that fall into these boundaries, instead of being represented for their uniqueness, are forced to become one or the other, leaving behind a quality that may not be inherently negative in the name of achieving postliminal reintegration into society via adulthood. Now, the issue teenagers face today is how to negotiate this growing dichotomy of "mentally ill" and "not mentally ill."

Tim Cresswell in *In Place/Out of Place* (1996), argues that "the center could not exist without the margin" (149). Society requires sectioned spaces to interact with, but this is not to say that one space is superior to the other. The liminal is not a space that needs to disappear, but individuals do not have to remain in the liminal indefinitely. The liminal is a chance for an individual to learn and find a sense of place in achieving the postliminal.

Just as mapping tries to manifest the invisible, so does speculative fiction. YASF deserves the same attention to research as its contemporary romance and drama

counterparts. The unique ability of YASF to introduce concepts like physical darkness and monstrosity works to take internal struggles characters face and visualize them so that readers can clearly identify how these behaviors function in society and across space. This also begs the attention of research because the recurring trope of aestheticizing a romanticized darkness codifying anxiety and depression being restricted to the liminal without chance for success in the postliminal, could be a potentially problematic thread arising in YASF that would run counter to the genre's normally celebrated handling of mental illness narratives.

Despite theories of place and liminality emerging from sociology, geography, and other social and behavioral sciences, applying these lenses to literature reveals the same real-life structures taking place in works of fiction that would often be thought of as distant from reality. Though these stories may be veiled in the fantastical, magical, and reach beyond the current findings of science to create new worlds, they are heavily rooted in real-life structures. Using psychoanalytic theory to reveal what the darkness in these stories represents is a crucial first step before critiquing how The metaphors taking place in speculative fiction have to be unpacked because understanding how the subjects those metaphors codify negotiate spaces.

III. Close Reading

Restrictions of Codified Anxiety Determined by Place in Leigh Bardugo's *King of Scars*

Leigh Bardugo's *King of Scars* (2019) serves as an exemplary text for the current wave of young adult speculative fiction (YASF) because of its use of darkness as physical power, religious underpinning, and moral ambiguity in war.[1] The main character, Nikolai Lantsov, is first introduced by the name Sturmhond in *Siege and Storm* (2013) as a privateer. He later reveals himself to the series protagonists to be the prince of Ravka, the fictional country where *King of Scars* takes place, and assists the protagonists in defeating the Darkling, the series antagonist, to end the civil war.[2] After spending most of his time roaming the seas and keeping his identity a secret, Nikolai is forced to ascend the throne after his brother's death, tethering him to the Grand Palace.

The conflict Nikolai faces in *King of Scars* begins slightly earlier at the conclusion of *Ruin and Rising* (2016). As a result of the penultimate battle against the Darkling, Nikolai is infected by the Darkling's powers and turned into a *nichevo'ya* (derived from the Bulgarian word "*nichevo*" meaning "nothing"), a winged monster of darkness created by the Darkling. After defeating the Darkling, Nikolai returns to normal, but his friends note "there's a difference in [Nikolai]" and that he seems

[1] Other popular YASF novels that utilize these themes are Victoria Aveyard's *Red Queen* (2015), Victoria Schwab's *This Savage Song* (2016), Emily Duncan's *Wicked Saints* (2019), and Brigid Kemmerer's *A Curse So Dark and Lonely* (2019).

[2] The Darkling (Aleksander Morozova) controls corporeal darkness and attempts to use his power to usurp the Ravkan throne. He used his power to scar the land (called the Fold) in a swath of darkness that he planned to weaponize for political power against surrounding countries.

"haunted" (Bardugo *Ruin and Rising* 391). Nikolai says, "I can still feel that darkness inside me. I keep thinking it will go away . . . . It's better now, but it's still there . . . . This isn't what people want of a king" (Bardugo *Ruin and Rising* 403). Nikolai's first concern after returning to normal is what Ravka will think of him.

Nikolai knows Ravka will never accept a monster king, and his fear of being revealed and dooming his country carries into *King of Scars.* In a world like the Grishaverse built by humans with supernatural powers, saints with inhuman forms, and monsters of darkness that eat people alive, Nikolai knows he is different.[3] He was born without powers and only later gains them by right of the Darkling infecting him with *merzost*, (in the fictional language, Ravkan, literally translated as "abomination") which is a forbidden power and not socially accepted by the Grisha. By this combination of unnatural acquisition and unacceptable power, Nikolai is pushed outside of acceptable boundaries. Nikolai says, "We're trained to understand the ordinary, to fear the difference, even if that difference is divine" (Bardugo 338). Nikolai knows this fear of the unexplained will not allow him to fulfil his role as king if Ravka knows the truth.

At the outset of *King of Scars*, Nikolai is forced to hide his monstrosity that has resurfaced since the conclusion of the original Grishaverse trilogy. Even as a human, he retains black scars on his hands that he keeps covered with gloves. The Ravkans know Nikolai has these scars, but not the cause of them. The public does not know their king

[3] All of the books taking place in the same universe as *King of Scars* have been dubbed the Grishaverse by fans and Macmillan Publishing alike. It encompasses any novel where the Grisha, beings who possess powers tied to natural phenomena, exist.

was turned into a monster, only that Nikolai was tortured because that is “the part the Ravkan people were best equipped to handle” (Bardugo 17). By comparison, other protagonists that were scarred by the Darkling are not forced to hide those marks. Because Nikolai was dehumanized by becoming a monster, this is kept a secret among his comrades. Nikolai hides the demon growing stronger inside of him because he knows, “The people clung to superstition. They feared the strange. Ravka could not afford another disruption, another weak king” (Bardugo 443). Nikolai has been taught by society that darkness is not allowed to show; darkness is a determinant of weakness, and Nikolai’s darkness is explicitly tied to his anxiety. To be strong means to keep his true feelings suppressed. He believes that, “if the monster emerged, if [he] revealed this dark presence, he might be the very thing that set his country back down the path of violence” (Bardugo 202).

The resurgence of the darkness in Nikolai by regularly turning him into a monster, draws on his own anxieties. He most often turns into the monster at night when he is left alone with his thoughts. During the day, he combats this by channeling his worries into something productive, engaging in denial and undoing. He focuses on a construction project for the country’s military, located in an underground base far from the palace. Drawing upon his strength of problem-solving, Nikolai discovers “[the demon] . . . retreated, held at bay by logic, the hope of progress, and the happy pastime of building giant things mean to explode” (Bardugo 55). By whatever means available, Nikolai finds exterior distractions to his interior conflicts. In response to his fear of losing control, he makes decisions.

Nikolai's transformation into the monster is preceded by "thought spiraling," where he allows himself to ruminate on his anxieties until they spiral one after another, almost becoming too much to bear.[4] Nikolai transforms into the monster when he is convinced he is about to let Zoya, his second-in-command, die because of his own inabilities (Bardugo 194, 348). He learns he can willingly call upon the monster when he lets his negative thoughts take over, when he "did what that dark voice had told him to do" (Bardugo 448). He ruminates on the past and laments for the future, believing he will be killed by this darkness. He describes the decisions he faces for his country like "branches [of a forest] crowding in on him" (Bardugo 96). When he is confronted with his own fears of inadequacy, he becomes the monster and his humanity gives way to animalistic behavior.

Nikolai denies that the monster is a part of himself throughout most of the novel. He sees the monster as something that "gnawed constantly at his sense of control" (Bardugo 333). He engages in the defense mechanism of displacement, blaming his monstrosity on the Darkling who originally infected him with the power: "The Darkling had known that Nikolai relied on his mind, his talent for thinking his way out of any situation, so he'd let the demon steal Nikolai's ability to speak and think rationally. The Darkling could have killed [him], but he wanted to punish [him] instead," (Bardugo 88). Rather than accept the monster as arising from Nikolai's own

[4] Thought spiraling is a term used to explain the feeling of ruminating on one thought until it becomes all an individual can focus on. This is a more specific behavior triggered by the umbrella intrusive thoughts, which is a component of obsessive-compulsive disorder (an anxiety disorder), according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness ("Obsessive").

subconscious, Nikolai sees it as something placed there by the Darkling to torment him.

Whenever possible, Nikolai avoids talking about the monster, as if speaking about it gives it power. Nikolai says, “Though everyone . . . knew what had been happening to him, it still felt like a dirty secret” (Bardugo 88). He does not feel comfortable talking about the demon because it has become taboo. To acknowledge the monster is to acknowledge he is losing control, and rather than speak of it, he suppresses those emotions. Nikolai internalizes the fear of the people around him. Society calls the power infecting him an abomination and he takes that label upon himself (Bardugo 103, 124). Nikolai wonders, “What if [the monster] grew stronger and continued to erode his control, to eat all the will that had guided him for so long? Abomination . . . . What if he was the drowning man and it was Ravka he would drag down with him?” (Bardugo 93). Nikolai not only internalizes what others fear about his darkness, but he also fears he will single-handedly ruin an entire country because of his own adequacy and the social expectations surrounding him. Nikolai is afraid of himself, “afraid to be left alone with the thing he might become” (Bardugo 103), and this fear is confirmed by the people surrounding him.

Nikolai’s fear of losing control by introduction of the monster also works to codify anxiety. The monster gives a physical form to intrusive thoughts. Despite this, Nikolai projects confidence and continues denying his situation. He keeps a witty air about him, wondering “How did the words come so easily –even as he contemplated losing his mind and his will?” (Bardugo 98). He believes that if he “didn’t laugh at [his

situation], he was fairly sure he'd go mad" (Bardugo 88). Nikolai has nowhere to turn for help because he believes he needs to conceal his feelings to the others around him and to his country. The overarching plot of the narrative involves Nikolai enacting a ritual to expel the darkness from him. Until he can find a cure, he drinks and takes strong sleeping tonics in (increasingly vain) attempts to suppress the monster (Bardugo 19, 22, 201, 409).

After several attempts at controlling the monster prove futile, Nikolai worries that he will never be rid of this darkness –he cannot expel a monster if the monster is truly himself. He wonders if "the darkness inside him did not belong to something else but to him alone?" (Bardugo 443). He begins to acknowledge the potential root cause of the monster rather than displace his anxiety onto the Darkling. Nikolai believes "he [cannot] heal himself" (Bardugo 444), but he has nowhere to turn for help. He cannot allow this fear to show. If he fails to conquer the monster, he will die. He will no longer be deemed a fit ruler and has even promised Zoya that "if he let himself become more monster than man, it would mean he had failed" and he promises to "load the gun [himself]" (Bardugo 218). This mindset implies suicide would be preferable and honorable rather than descending entirely into monstrosity.

To learn to control the monster, Nikolai is forced to train himself to call upon the monster willingly at a cost to his mental well-being. Zoya notes, "Nikolai was getting better at calling the monster, but his mood seemed to be growing darker. He was quieter and more distant at the end of each [training session]" (Bardugo 382). Nikolai is repeatedly subjected to his own dark thoughts and anxiety without a healthy

way to cope. He is only forced to face his feelings and succumb to monstrosity because it is beneficial to the people around him. After Nikolai willingly transforms into the monster and returns to his human form on his own, Zoya celebrates: “You did it . . . . You called [the monster] up and then you sent him packing” (Bardugo 350), failing to acknowledge the cost summoning the monster has on Nikolai because it is to her benefit and the benefit of the country. As long as Nikolai is useful, his monstrosity is acceptable.

Eventually, Nikolai reaches a breaking point, propagated by a lack of opportunity to cope with his feelings and fear of his own inward spiraling out of control. The thought of not finding a cure “made him impossibly weary” (Bardugo 444), demonstrating how, even though the others see Nikolai as gaining control over his monstrosity, it is all performative. Nikolai likens the back-and-forth between his thoughts and the monster’s thoughts to a battle, saying “his mind felt like enemy territory” (Bardugo 196). He fears he will be “the forever soldier, eternally at war, unable to ever lay down his arms and heal.” While battling the demon’s words in his head, he thinks back on how long he has been fighting: “He thought he had grown used to his scars, but he had never grasped how much of his will it would take to hide them. He had fought long days without rest and long nights without comfort” (Bardugo 444). The monster tempts Nikolai with rest –with death. Nikolai’s fear is that he will not be able to “hide his scars,” pointing to the influence society has on his own self-concept and how it is causing him to deteriorate. Nikolai knows he will lose

himself entirely if he accepts the monster's words, yet he is still tempted with the finality and escape of death.

Only after Nikolai sees the monster reflected to him does he accept the monster as a part of himself. Nikolai can no longer deny his monstrosity after seeing this manifestation of his own thoughts. "Like calls to like" is a motto repeated several times throughout the Grishaverse, referring to the pull to natural phenomena Grisha feel. By this, Nikolai understands the monster only ever drew out his own darkness and gave it physical form. After fighting against the monster tempting him to succumb to its control several times, Nikolai gives in, but takes ownership of that darkness: "He let go of the perfect prince, the good king. He reached for all the wounded, shameful things he'd been so sure he had to hide. In this moment, he was not kind or merciful or just. He was a monster. He left his mortal body behind" (Bardugo 448). By understanding the darkness inside of him rather than tirelessly working to suppress it, Nikolai gains control over it and is able to use its power to stop the antagonists. To achieve this, Nikolai must reject his social boundaries.

Where Nikolai's anxiety would normally be internalized, the introduction of physical monstrosity takes his anxiety and manifests it in the physical world. Because of this visibility, readers can identify how Nikolai's behaviors and fears limit his mobility in a society that rejects his attained monstrosity. Despite being the king of Ravka, Nikolai still must fight for agency because he has been given attributes that dehumanize him and strip him of conscious performance to adhere to society's expectations. Nikolai's sense of place, which would normally be established through

socializing and memory, is represented visibly by the intrusion of the monster into his daily life.

After turning into a monster, Nikolai's priority is covering up any signs of his transformation. Zoya chases Nikolai down and chains him up to prevent him from attacking anyone, and after Nikolai turns back into a human, the first thing he asks Zoya is "I don't suppose you brought me a fresh shirt?" (Bardugo 15). Even before Zoya releases his chains, he tries to clean his appearance. He makes jokes with Zoya despite trembling and acts as if nothing happened (Bardugo 16).

As the monster strengthens, physical signs of Nikolai's darkness intrude on his daily life. He races forward to save Zoya from a fall that would kill her and manages to reach her in time, but not without transforming: "Nikolai looked down at his hands. His fingers were still stained black, curled into talons. They had torn through his gloves" (Bardugo 195). His kingly clothes are ruined by becoming the monster. This happens in front of Zoya and others close to him. His monstrosity destroys his confident performance, making it impossible to deny he is losing control.

His monstrosity transforms many of Nikolai's features, reclaiming his physical space. His eyes become "mirror black" and dark veins spread along his skin; a boy who saw him in the countryside recalls "two vast wings unfurled from [Nikolai's] back, their edges curling like smoke" (Bardugo 10). These features sharply contrast Nikolai's normally gold hair and hazel eyes. The shadow Nikolai pushes his anxiety into becomes a literal alteration of his appearance.

Nikolai's transformation is seamless throughout the narrative. There are no lapses in his narration. Only after catching a glimpse of his shadow "bracketed by wings that curled from his own back" does he realize he transformed to save Zoya (Bardugo 193). Nikolai's self-concept is destabilized when his shadow reveals what he truly looks like. Nikolai has to see or hear a sign of his transformation before he understands what has taken place. It is not until the end, when Nikolai takes ownership of the monster by declaring "I am the monster and the monster is me" that he begins to notice his transformation (Bardugo 448). The intrusion of the monster on his appearance is not something he willfully controls for the majority of the narrative.

As a monster/human hybrid, Nikolai inhabits a liminal space. He is neither fully human, because he always feels the monster's presence inside of him; nor is he fully monster because he relies on a mantra ("Remember who you are") to tether him to his humanity (Bardugo 349, 441, 445).[5] Nikolai oscillates between identities and stands at a threshold where he may, at any moment, become either human or monster. When Nikolai learns to call the monster willingly, he says this "opened the door. He doubted it would be so easy to close the next time" (Bardugo 351). Nikolai understands, the more acquainted with the monster he becomes, the further the boundary between his humanity and monstrosity is blurred. This blurring is further reinforced by his seamless transformations.

[5] Further, Nikolai repeats "Remember who you are," twice each time in the narrative, demonstrating ritualistic thinking to undo his negative thinking, which could be interpreted as a verbal compulsion.

Nikolai is forced between two identities because he is given an ultimatum, which would demand him to reject the liminal space he inhabits. He must conquer the monster or die. If there is no cure to Nikolai's monstrosity and he is lost to the power of the Darkling, Zoya promises to "put a bullet in [Nikolai's] brain" (Bardugo 217). Nikolai believes that if he cannot overcome the monster, he will and should die or Ravka will fall by his hands (Bardugo 90, 93, 130, 218, 444). Because of these harsh boundaries, Nikolai does not see a potential where he exists with his monstority. If he cannot be cured, he is doomed. To escape liminality, Nikolai must reject monstrosity, but with the monstrosity intricately linked to anxiety and qualities that cannot be inherently "cured," Nikolai is restricted to a liminal space.

This ultimatum doubles in revealing that Nikolai will be seen as useless if he fails to conquer his monstrosity and leave it behind in the liminal. Nikolai and the others around him believe that he will soon become useless if he succumbs to monstrosity, which "had set the clock ticking" (Bardugo 93). Nikolai has to make several decisions pertinent to the success of Ravka, but now that he is fighting the monster, he has decided that he must complete all of these decisions—marriage, securing the succession to the Ravkan throne—before the monster takes over him. Nikolai says, "[These people that knew him] trusted him. But the demon lurking inside him might change all that. What if it grew stronger and continued to erode his control . . . . What if it was . . . Ravka he would drag down with him?" (Bardugo 93). Nikolai wants to make the best decisions possible for his country, and despite losing control of the monster inside of him, goes forward with the decision to bring marriageable

princesses to the palace so that he can still secure the future of Ravka though he may die in the process. Zoya tells Nikolai, “I even believe you have the charm and guile to outmaneuver our enemies. But how much time can you buy us? Six months? A year?” (Bardugo 92). The people around him doubt his capability to be successful if he descends in monstrosity, and Nikolai internalizes their expectations of him, putting himself on a timeline before he loses his mind. Despite Nikolai’s thinking not being altered as a monster, the people around him have decided he is not reliable in that form which discredits him.

Even after Nikolai demonstrates he is capable of making rational decisions after transforming, the people closest to him still fear him. After saving Zoya’s life, Nikolai tries to assure her that she is safe despite Nikolai’s transformation, but he cannot speak as the monster, and “only a growl emerged.” Nikolai continues, “In the next second a shock was traveling through his body—Zoya’s power vibrating through his bones. He cried out . . . and felt his wings curl in on themselves, vanishing” (Bardugo 194). Only after Nikolai’s physical monstrosity fade and he “[tastes] sweet language returning to his tongue,” does Zoya trust him (Bardugo 194). Nothing changes in Nikolai’s behavior, only what is seen to the others around him. Just as Zoya celebrated Nikolai physically reigning in his monstrosity at the cost of his own mental well-being, she only trusts Nikolai when he fits her preconceived idea of “under control.”

Whether human or monster, Nikolai cannot complete any rituals without being interrupted. As the monster, Nikolai’s most prominent, inhuman feature is his “wings of curling shadow” (Bardugo 18), a signifier of his desire to be free from the obligations

of the palace and also a codifier of his fight-or-flight response. Every time Nikolai transforms into the monster while inside the palace, he flees (Bardugo 10, 18, 123). Nikolai is always stopped in transit. Amidst being socially limited because he cannot hide his monstrosity, he is also unable to complete his journey as the monster. Instead he is repeatedly stopped by Zoya and company and beat into submission (Bardugo 11, 128).

Nikolai's liminal space (and powers that bind him to it) is further reinforced by the existence of the Fold. The Fold is suspended in a permanent, gray twilight and exists outside of time (Bardugo 332). Saints long-thought to be dead live in this space. They shift between animal and human forms, showing they too embody the in-between Fold. The Fold is where Nikolai must perform the Thorn Wood ritual to cleanse himself of the monster. He attempts to escape liminality by physically returning to the most liminal space in the series.

Nikolai's completion of the Thorn Wood ritual results in the destruction of the Fold, releasing the space from infinite twilight (Bardugo 488). However, despite the physical liminality scarring the land being destroyed, Nikolai himself does not escape the liminal. Visibly, it appears as though Nikolai rid himself of the monster, and when Zoya asks if he is cured, Nikolai lies. He says, "He didn't have the heart to tell her he could still feel the monster somewhere inside of him—weakened, licking its wounds, but waiting for the opportunity to rise again" (Bardugo 448). Because Nikolai still believes the monster is in him, and he cannot successfully reintegrate into society

unless he is cured, Nikolai remains in the liminal, trapped by social boundaries to which he cannot conform.

When Nikolai returns to the palace, he does not immediately readjust to life, further demonstrating his failure to reach postliminality. Regardless of whether the monster is truly in Nikolai, or he simply believes the monster is inside of him, Nikolai is tethered to the liminal because he is not allowing himself to reach postliminality. He has not experienced a revolutionary change to cross the threshold between the liminal and postliminal. Based on how others have treated him up until this point, once the monster resurfaces, Nikolai will be Othered again. Nikolai is still detached from his surroundings:

> [He] was about to turn the corner when he saw … himself. A bolt of panic shook him, his mind racing with confused thoughts. What if he wasn't Nikolai anymore? What if he was just the monster? What if he was still caught in the twilight Fold and this was all a dream? He looked down at his hands—scarred but human, without claws. I am Nikolai Lantsov. I am here. I am home. (Bardugo 491)

After encountering the imposter disguised to remain in the palace in Nikolai's place (while he journeyed to the Fold), Nikolai doubts his own humanity. Nikolai's self-concept is still shaken after becoming fully monster. He must remind himself of where he is physically located and who he is to reconnect with reality. Nikolai has physically returned to the palace, but his sense of Self is not wholly intact. Just like before, when Nikolai had to remind himself to "Remember who you are," as a tether to his

humanity, so does he continue this behavior to root himself in his humanity and return to performing his role as king.

Nikolai is never presented a chance to cope with his anxiety through the novel because his priority is concealing it, lest the monster surface. Instead of coping, Nikolai continues to suppress and deflect his anxiety. Even to the last scene of the novel, Nikolai returns to the Grand Palace and immediately returns to unraveling the assassination plot against him, a line of people falsely claiming to be his biological father to claim political power, and the return of a villain long thought dead. He remains in the liminal space amidst an incomplete transition, and is forced to perform his role just the same at the conclusion of the novel as he did at the outset.

IV. Conclusion

While readers can understand why Nikolai would want to be rid of his inflicted darkness in the world of the Grishaverse, the close association of Nikolai's darkness with his anxiety and fear of revealing his suppressed feelings to the people around him runs dangerously close to conflicting with the purpose and value of young adult literature as outlined by YALSA. Instead of reassuring teens that they are not alone, they are instead told, by narratives like Nikolai's descent into monstrosity without explicit redemption, that their own fears of spiraling out of control and being successful into adulthood are true. Instead of acceptance for their uniqueness, teenagers see that without leaving behind their monstrous qualities, they will not achieve postliminal adulthood; they are instead reassured that they are the other.

The codifying of anxiety as monstrosity is not unique to Leigh Bardugo's *King of Scars,* though the manifestation of anxiety as a literal monster is something only speculative fiction affords. A theme is likely in the process of developing in the YASF genre; rather than employing darkness as a plot device for creating a complex narrative, it is repeatedly used to codify anxiety and other mental health disorders. This is not to argue that darkness can *never* be used to represent those subjects, but when the recurring narratives becomes anxious monsters losing control and believing death to be preferable, the trope becomes problematic. Anxiety disorders and mental health disorders hardly exist in YASF as the genre stands now. While the genre is developing, and these stories are still trying to find a way into the common narrative,

authors have a responsibility to be aware of these trends, and make sure they are upholding the values of engaging, supportive young adult literature.

Young adult literature is a companion to the young reader during a threshold of opportunity in their life. Literature is a tool used to build an understanding of the world. This literature has a unique opportunity--especially in a time of either/or boundaries in the media--to be a voice for embracing the liminal and reassuring readers that they are not alone.

Combining critical psychoanalysis with the geocentric concepts of place, space, and liminality, provides a versatile lens for unpacking YASF. This combination of theory is not limited to examining codifiers of mental health disorders. A similar combination of critical theory that first deconstructs the metaphors of speculative fiction before engaging with place and movement could be applied to other marginalized groups, like queer-coding and race-coding across YASF.

None of this is to say that young adult literature is on a deteriorating path. In writing this, it is my hope to illuminate the value of scholarship in young adult speculative fiction--to criticize and understand what is often written off as lesser literature--and provide a model by which future analysis of the genre can seriously consider the concepts of everyday life that are otherwise veiled in the fantastical.

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